



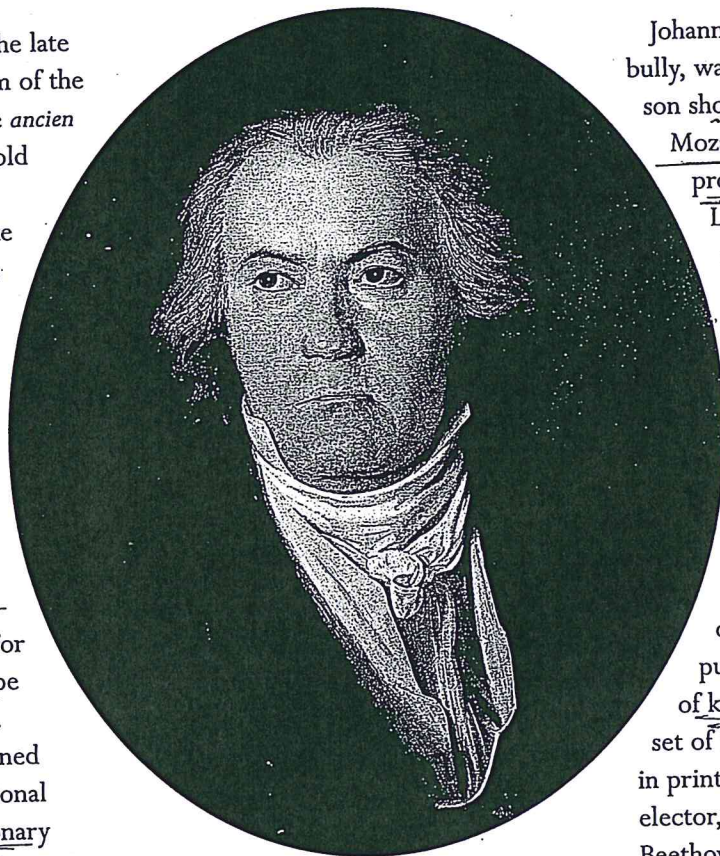
Ludwig van Beethoven

Nature would burst should she attempt to produce nothing save Beethovens.
French Revolution

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–56)

key

Mozart died in Vienna in the late autumn of 1791, a victim of the stifling class conventions of the *ancien régime*. A year later, a 20-year-old named Ludwig van Beethoven arrived in Vienna, keen to make his name as a musician. By this time, the face of European society was changing fast. The French Revolution was in full swing, and Austria – horrified at the treatment meted out to the French monarchs, particularly Queen Marie Antoinette, a former Austrian archduchess – had declared war on France. For more than two decades, Europe would be ripped apart by war. While Mozart's life had remained largely unaffected by international politics, Beethoven's revolutionary artistic vision was shaped by the ideology and volcanic social change of the turbulent times in which he lived.



ABOVE: Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827), painted in 1823 by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller.

Early years

Beethoven was born into a musical family. His grandfather had been music director to the Archbishop-Elector of Cologne, and his father was also employed at the electoral court, though in the lowlier position of singer and instrumentalist. As with the Mozart family, the majority of the seven children born to Johann van Beethoven and his wife died in infancy. Three boys survived: Ludwig, born on 16 or 17 December 1770, and two younger brothers Caspar Carl and Nikolaus.

Johann van Beethoven, an alcoholic bully, was determined that his eldest son should follow in the young Mozart's footsteps as a child prodigy. But Johann lacked Leopold Mozart's abilities as a teacher, and forced his son to practise the keyboard constantly at the expense of his general education. From around 1780 Beethoven received more kindly and sympathetic instruction from the court composer and organist Christian Neefe, who organized the publication of his pupil's first compositions – a set of keyboard variations. In 1783 a set of three piano sonatas appeared in print with a dedication to the elector, whose successor appointed Beethoven second court organist the following year.

In 1787 Neefe suggested that Beethoven should travel to Vienna to take lessons from Mozart, who was much impressed with the young man's talent. But Beethoven's trip was curtailed by news of his mother's serious illness: she died of tuberculosis in the summer of that year, leaving him to cope with his father's violence and alcoholism. At the age of 18 Beethoven assumed responsibility for the family affairs, being granted half his father's court salary as well as his own. He also found an influential patron, Count Ferdinand Waldstein, who persuaded the elector to allow Beethoven leave to study with Haydn in Vienna. The



ABOVE: Beethoven's birthplace in Bonn.

Life and works

NATIONALITY: German

BORN: Bonn, 1770;

DIED: Vienna, 1827

SPECIALIST GENRES:

Symphonies, piano concertos, string quartets, piano sonatas.

MAJOR WORKS: First period: Symphonies No. 1 (1800) and 2 (1802); six string quartets; Piano Sonatas No. 8 (*Pathétique*, 1799) and No. 14 (*Moonlight*, 1801).

Second period: Symphonies No. 3 (*Eroica*, 1803) to No. 7; *Kreutzer* Sonata for violin and piano (1803); *Fidelio* (1805); Violin Concerto (1806); *Razumovsky* Quartets (1806); Piano Concerto No. 5 (*Emperor*, 1809); *Archduke* Trio (1811).

Third period: *Diabelli Variations* (1823); last piano sonatas and string quartets; *Missa solemnis* (1823); Symphony No. 9 (*Choral*, 1824).

elector agreed, and in 1792 Beethoven arrived in Vienna, the city which became his permanent home.

Vienna

Beethoven found that his lessons with Haydn were not a great success, but he quickly began to make a name as a pianist, with a formidable reputation for improvisation. "He is greatly admired for the velocity of his playing, and astounds everybody by the way he can master the greatest difficulties with ease," a local paper reported. He also found a new and powerful patron, Prince Lichnowsky (in whose mansion

he had an apartment), and despite his unprepossessing appearance – stocky, swarthy, with an ugly, red, pockmarked face – and rather boorish manners, he found himself tolerated by fashionable society.

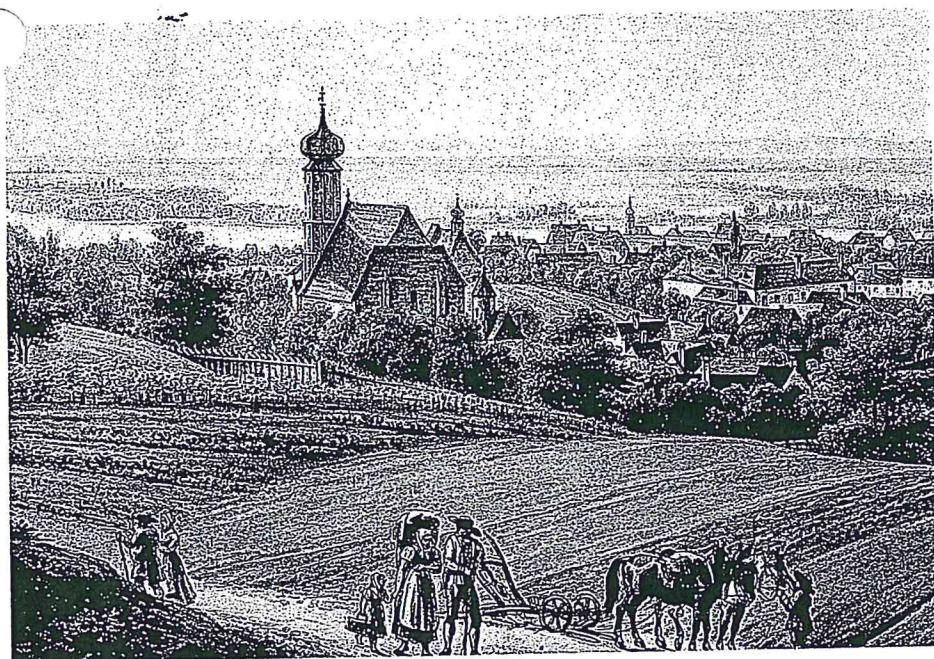
He gave his first public concert, playing a new piano concerto of his own, at the Burgtheater on 29 March 1795, astonishing the audience with his fiery virtuosity and establishing a pattern which would continue for several years. By 1796 he had published a set of piano trios and three piano sonatas (a genre he would develop far beyond the Classical "galant" style of Mozart and Haydn), and had earned enough money to set himself up in his own apartment. Over the next four years he went on occasional concert tours, gave subscription concerts in Vienna, and issued his chamber works in print – sonatas for piano (including the magnificent *Pathétique* Sonata No. 8 in C minor), violin and cello, and the Op. 16 Quintet for piano and wind.

All these works show Beethoven's desire to push at the boundaries of conventional compositional technique, to expand sonata form, and to infuse his work with unheard-of drama and passion.

These principles were already evident in the first of his nine symphonies (written in 1800), which, while conforming to the standard Classical four-movement format, relies not so much on lyrical themes as on rhythmic dynamism and the development of short melodic fragments, or motifs. Clearly, the old courtly "minuet and trio" which traditionally constituted the third movement of a symphony had outlived its purpose: from the Second Symphony onwards Beethoven replaced it with a faster, more dynamic and rhythmically propelled scherzo, while retaining a tripartite structure with a slower, more lyrical central section. "There is something revolutionary about that music," remarked the emperor.



ABOVE: Beethoven, aged 17, playing to Mozart. Mozart declared that the young genius would "soon astonish the world".



ABOVE: A view of rural Heiligenstadt, where Beethoven escaped from city life to compose and recuperate, and where he wrote the "Heiligenstadt Testament".

The Heiligenstadt crisis

Around the turn of Beethoven's 30th year, just as his career seemed to be soaring, he was struck by an appalling personal crisis. He was forced to acknowledge the fact that he was

going deaf. For several years he had tried to hide his hearing problems for both professional and social reasons, but it became clear that the affliction was incurable.

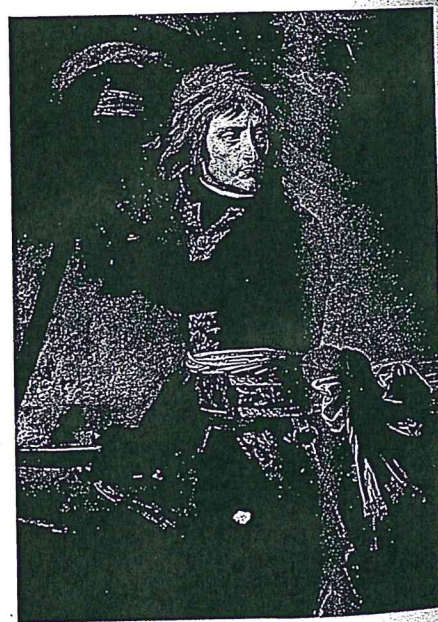
In the summer of 1802 he reached a nadir of despair, while staying at the country retreat of Heiligenstadt, just outside Vienna. He wrote a long letter (known as the "Heiligenstadt Testament") to his brothers, in which he described his utter misery: "For me there can be no pleasure in human society, no intelligent conversation, no mutual confidences. I must live like an outcast." But though he had contemplated suicide, Beethoven concluded that he must henceforth live for his art: "It seemed impossible to leave the world before I had accomplished all I was destined to do." The letter was never sent, and was found among his effects after his death.

Years of struggle

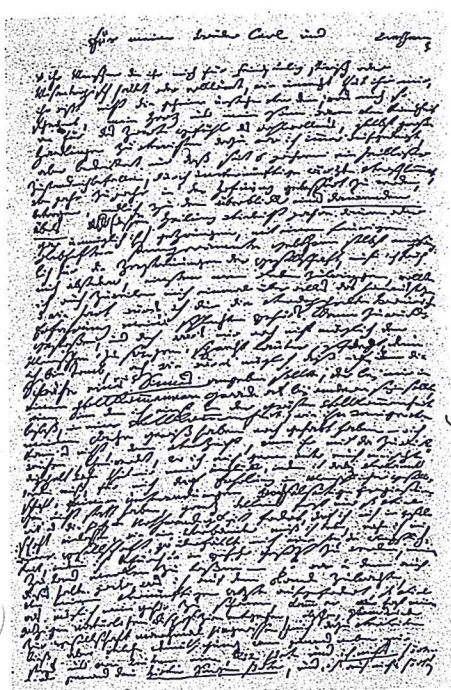
Beethoven's inner struggle is reflected in the titanic works of the next few years. These included the massive *Eroica* Symphony (No. 3), originally

dedicated to Napoleon, nearly twice as long as a conventional symphony, with a powerful and tragic funeral march as its slow movement; the Triple Concerto for piano, violin and cello; two piano sonatas (No. 21, the *Waldstein* and No. 23, the *Appassionata*); and his only opera, *Fidelio*.

The opera's plot was based on a French Revolutionary tale of a wife's heroic efforts to save her imprisoned husband. (For political reasons, Beethoven was obliged to move the action to 18th-century Spain.) By the time of the opera's production, in 1805, Napoleon's army had occupied Vienna and *Fidelio* received only two performances. It remains a lone masterpiece of its kind in Beethoven's output, perhaps lacking the innate sense of theatre of Mozart's mature operas, but containing memorable dramatic moments such as Leonora's great "Abscheulicher" aria, the quartet "Mir ist so wunderbar" and the moving chorus when the prisoners are brought from their cells and greet the light of day.

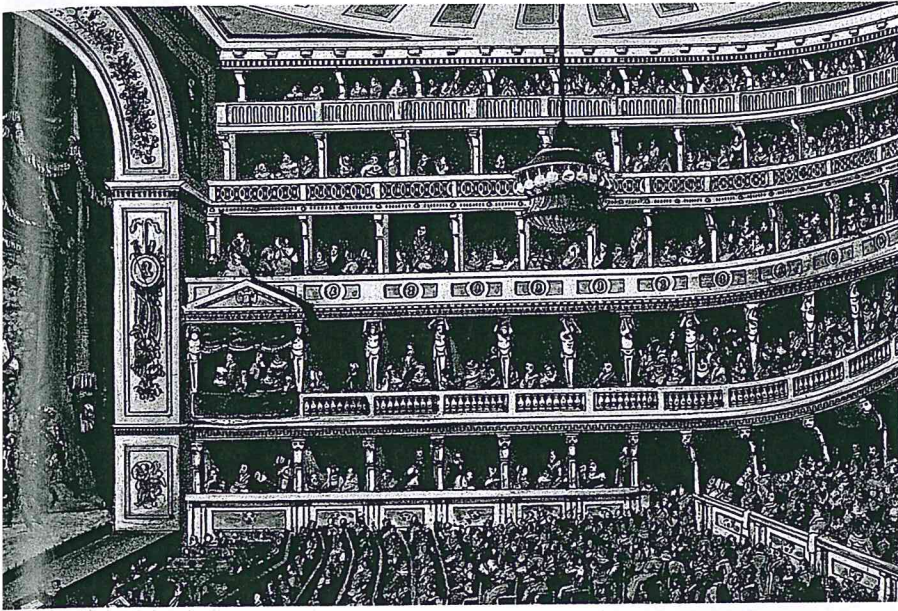


ABOVE: Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), the original dedicatee of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3* (the *Eroica*), but whom Beethoven despised when he proclaimed himself Emperor of France.



ABOVE: The "Heiligenstadt Testament", a letter written in 1802, in which Beethoven

... told his brothers of his deafness



ABOVE: The premiere of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, 1805. The opera was not an immediate success, owing to the French occupation.

Disillusioned after *Fidelio*'s failure, Beethoven concentrated on instrumental pieces, producing a set of three string quartets dedicated to the Russian ambassador to Austria, Count Andreas Razumovsky, the Fourth Symphony, the Violin Concerto (again a lone masterpiece), and his Fourth Piano Concerto. Just before Christmas 1808 the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, both revolutionary in concept, were

premiered at the same concert. The Fifth, with its progression from tragedy to hope, has been interpreted as representing Beethoven's own struggle against adversity, and is one of the first symphonic works to recycle thematic material between movements. The Sixth (the *Pastoral*) is a harbinger of Romanticism. One of the earliest symphonic examples of "tone-painting", it illustrates scenes of



ABOVE: The triumphant entrance of Napoleon's army into Vienna in 1805. The French occupation caused hardship for Viennese citizens.

Austrian country life, including a realistic thunderstorm, birdsong and a village festival.

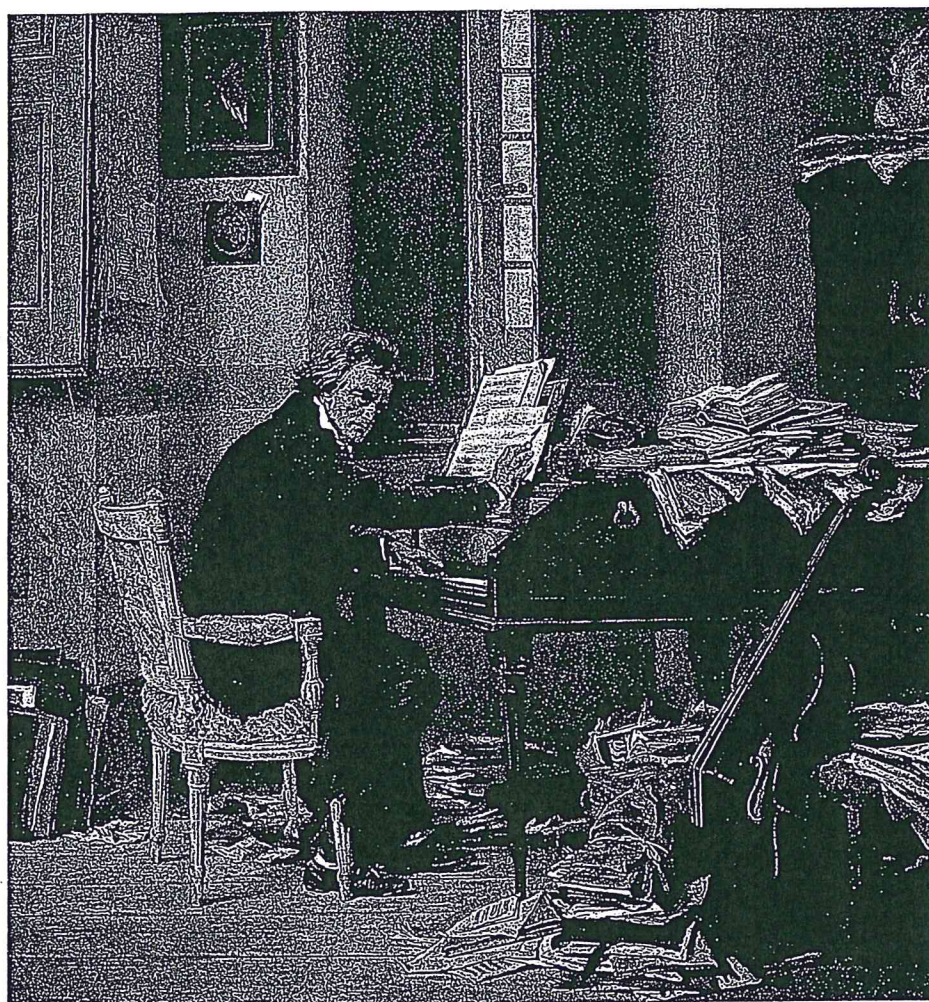
By this time, Beethoven was enjoying a measure of financial security through the support of several wealthy patrons, including the Archduke Rudolph (to whom Beethoven dedicated his Fifth Piano Concerto, known as *The Emperor*). When Napoleon's troops invaded Vienna in 1809, the imperial family fled to safety: Beethoven celebrated their return from exile in 1810 with the Piano Sonata No. 26, *Das Lebewohl* (*The Farewell*). Seven years later Rudolph also received the dedication of the *Hammerklavier* Sonata (No. 29).

Disappointment in love

Apart from his deafness, Beethoven's life was marred by his failure to find a partner: the objects of his affection were usually either married, or else above him in social station (such as Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, the dedicatee of the *Moonlight Sonata*). An unsent letter written in 1812 reveals a deep attachment to an unspecified



ABOVE: Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, to whom the *Moonlight Sonata* was dedicated.



ABOVE: A 19th-century artist's impression of Beethoven (in later life) composing in his Viennese apartment. He was notably untidy.

woman, "the immortal beloved", who may possibly have been Antonie Brentano, the wife of a Frankfurt businessman. She and Beethoven never met in later life, but many years later he dedicated to her his last work for piano, the *Diabelli Variations*.

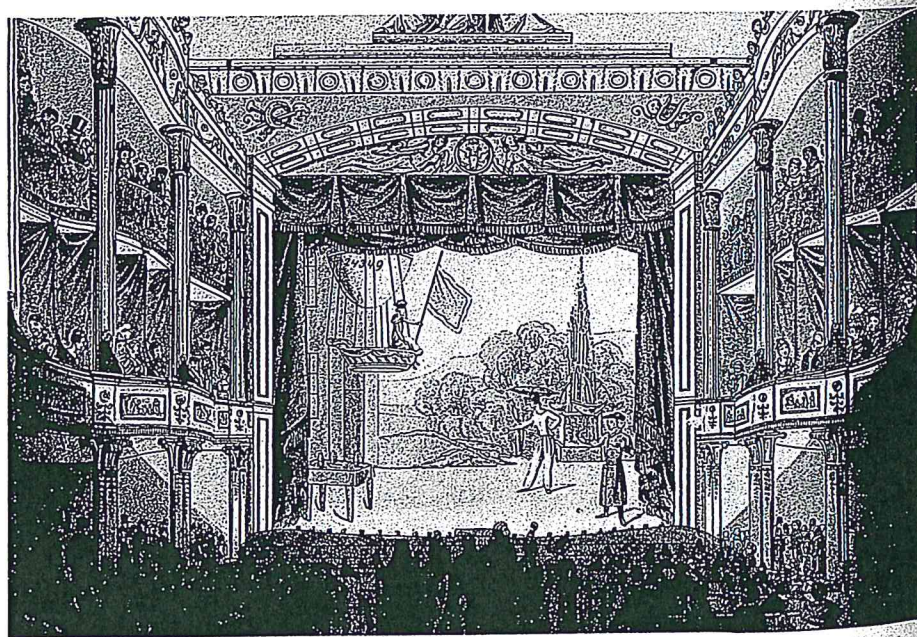
Beethoven seems to have despised women of a lower social class: an attitude which led to acrimonious rows with his brothers over their "unsuitable" choice of wives. In 1820, after a long legal battle begun after his brother's death in 1815, he became sole guardian of his nephew Karl, perhaps fulfilling his own frustrated desire for an heir. Their relationship, however, proved a stormy one, and overshadowed the later years of Beethoven's life.

Last years

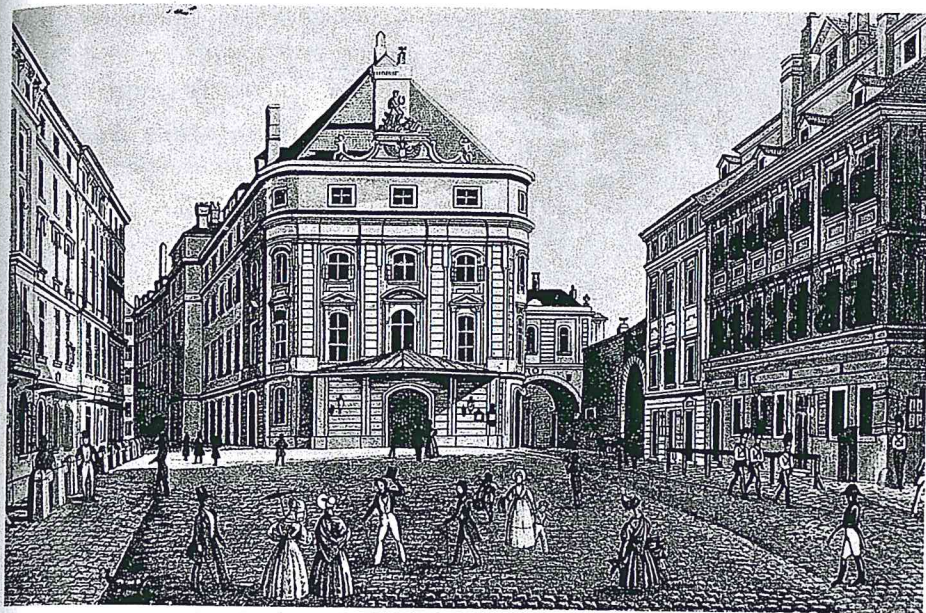
In 1813 Beethoven celebrated Napoleon's defeat on the Iberian Peninsula with his *Battle Symphony*. Originally written for a mechanical instrument called the "panharmonicon", the piece is far inferior to the contemporary Seventh and Eighth



ABOVE: Beethoven's ear-trumpet lying on the manuscript of his Eroica Symphony.



ABOVE: The opening of the Theater in der Josefstadt in Vienna, 1822, for which Beethoven wrote the overture *The Consecration of the House*.



ABOVE: The Kärntnertor Theatre in Vienna, where the première of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony took place on 7 May 1824.

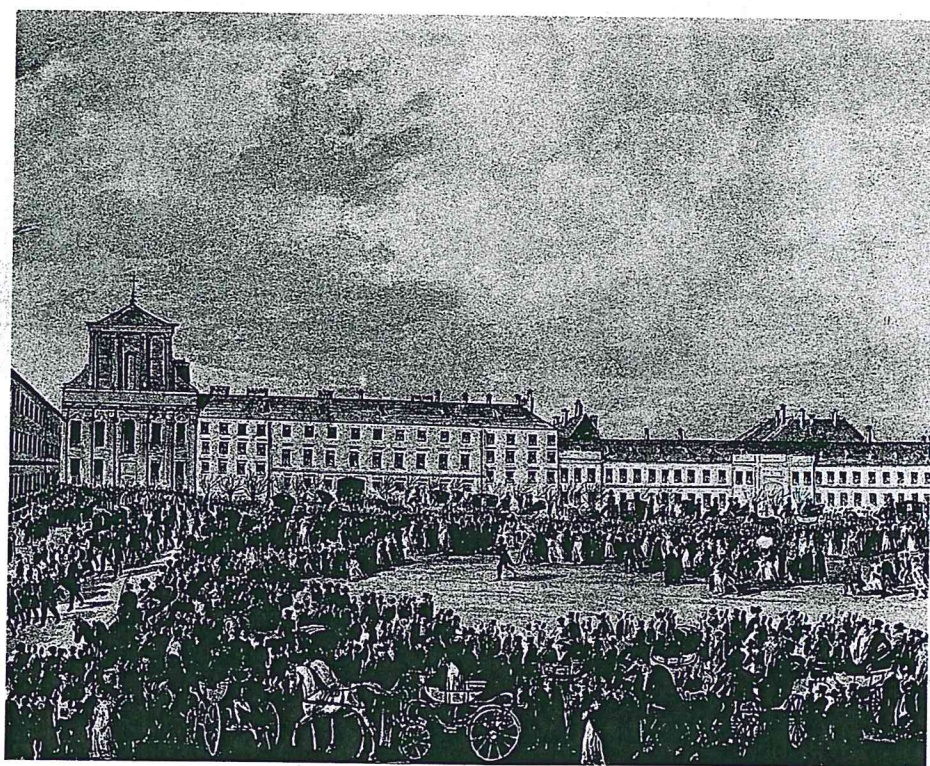
Symphonies. By this time Beethoven had more or less abandoned public performance, and by 1818 he was stone deaf.

He became increasingly withdrawn and anti-social, but continued to compose. Sacred music had never figured largely in his output, but in 1822 he completed the *Missa solennis*, originally intended to celebrate Archduke Rudolph's enthronement as Archbishop of Olmütz. This great work, written "from the heart to the heart", ranks with Bach's B minor Mass as one of the crowning achievements of its composer's career. Sections of it were performed in May 1824 at a concert which included the première of the Ninth Symphony, the result of Beethoven's desire to write a "choral symphony with voices". Within a traditional symphonic framework (except that the scherzo is placed second), Beethoven burst the bonds of convention by introducing into the finale a setting for solo voices and chorus of Schiller's *An die Freude* (Ode to Joy), with its ecstatic vision of an international brotherhood of man.

Beethoven's last instrumental compositions – the last three piano sonatas and the late string quartets (including the six-movement Op. 130, with its immense fugal finale) – have always been regarded as embodying

Western musical art at a peak of perfection. They are introspective works, not intended to be "understood" or applauded in the conventional sense. They are the work of a man who had withdrawn into an inner life, which could only be expressed through the medium of pure, abstract music.

In 1826 Beethoven's nephew Karl attempted suicide. By this time the composer (a heavy drinker) was already mortally ill with liver disease. After months of suffering, Beethoven died on 26 March 1827. In contrast to Mozart's low-key burial, 10,000 people are estimated to have watched Beethoven's funeral procession. The poet Franz Grillparzer delivered the funeral oration, in honour of "the man who inherited and enriched the immortal fame of Handel and Bach, of Haydn and Mozart... Until his death he preserved a father's heart for mankind. Thus he was, thus he died, thus he will live to the end of time."



ABOVE: A contemporary watercolour of Beethoven's funeral procession leaving the "House of the Black Spaniard", his last residence (to the right of the church).